

How Old is the Old Colony? A Reflection on Railroading and Duxbury 1825-1939

By the Rev. Canon Robert E. Merry

The key to the game of life on this earth is power: power to master the forces of nature; power to sway the hearts and minds of people, power to control the events and circumstances that beset us. Power has been the motivating force of a Boss Tweed, a Ghengis Khan, A Roald Amundsen, a Charles Lindbergh, or even our nuclear physicists who now have as Winston Churchill said "unlocked enough physical power to blast us all back to the Stone Age." Since earliest times the acquisition and directing of power has been the motivating force of the human race.

Power as a sensual experience or perception has had differing impressions on individual people according to their respective age and experience or other circumstances. We can each one of us recall when we were struck by a display of power. And usually this experience has remained with us all our lives...

My own first glimpse of raw physical power that has always remained with me came when I was 7 or 8 years of age in Boston's South Railway Station at 5:15 pm one winter's afternoon. My father had taken me into Boston on his weekly visit to the Market District to purchase meat supplies for the retail meat business he conducted in Duxbury. We had finished our buying and lunched at Durgin Park's restaurant and father had shown me off before his cronies in the meat industry and headed for South Station and track 23 at the far end of the station from which all Duxbury trains left everyday. I will never forget the sight that met my gaze as I pushed my way through the swinging doors behind father that frigid afternoon.

The trains headed by their locomotives were all lined up clear across the station and making a deafening roar. There must have been 25 of them facing the walkway where we had to pass but they were hidden by the clouds of steam that hung in the air in the near zero temperature. Their huge steel barrel boilers were barely visible but their Westinghouse air brake pumps were pulsating and an occasional outburst of steam sounding like a shotgun above the din demonstrated a full load of steam pressure ready and anxious to get the wheels rolling.

I was some years later to experience a small part of just how far and wide these wheels would roll when I boarded a train from this same platform and journeyed across the continent and took a ship for a 7-day sail to Hawaii. For this moment there were indeed trains which would cover most of the North American continent moving out from this very platform. Looking back now from a perspective of 70 years I would like to say as an amateur historian that if the achievement of the American railroads were concentrated in one spot say in St. Louis, MO, it would be a monument of such magnitude that would rival the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China.

quired for the use of the crude boats of the period. The first canal in America was dug at the north end of Duxbury Bay in 1636 joining the bay with the ocean. It is only a ditch today but the road over it is still named "Canal St." Canals were excavated often parallel to rivers mainly in Pennsylvania and Ohio and New York as a means of transportation usually of heavy cargos. But canals had many drawbacks chiefly that they often dried up in late summer and froze in the winter months. Railroads came in as a great improvement over canals but to anticipate it is interesting that the early ones were constructed to join canals and rivers.

The first transportation device that could be called a primitive railroad was a tramway built in Boston in 1795. It was built with wooden rails and used wooden box cars pulled by horses in this case to haul brick. The second railroad ran on stone tracks and carried granite blocks from the quarry in Quincy down to the wharf where they were loaded onto barges and transported to Charlestown to construct the Bunker Hill Monument in 1825 and '26. Three years later the Delaware and Hudson Railroad was built using a steam locomotive imported from England to haul coal from the anthracite region around Scranton, PA. At this same time a line was laid between Charleston, SC and Hamburg including freight and passengers for the first time. The Mohawk and Hudson Railroad chartered in 1826 and completed in 1833 boasted the longest railroad at the time (135 miles).

The Old Colony Railroad that served Duxbury was originally chartered in 1844 and it was hoped to connect it with the Boston and Cohasset line that had been functioning well for some time. But Duxbury had a satisfactory stagecoach to Boston and one also connecting with trains in Kingston only 6 miles away. We had packet boat service often that picked up mail at the end of Clark's Island on its way to Boston. For larger and heavier loads of coal and lumber coastwise schooners were available so why should Duxbury bother with a railroad?

But persistent Duxbury citizens raised money both in 1861 and 1866 and finally in 1871 it was rushed through in order to transport the 10,000 people who attended the dedication of the foundation stone of the Standish Monument. The railroad served the town until its last run on June 24, 1939. Joan Schlueter has given us a vivid picture of its operation during these years in an excellent article in our 350th Anniversary's *Duxbury Book*. She tells of the townsfolk's involvement in it: "The railroad provided jobs for townspeople -- baggage men, flagmen, conductors and engineers." I have told elsewhere (*Duxbury Clipper* of June 7, 1979) of 2 of my experiences with the railroad: a runaway with our horse Ginger and a race out into the yards with my roommate (now Justice) Harry Blackmun to catch the 5:15 one Thanksgiving Eve when we were freshmen at Harvard.

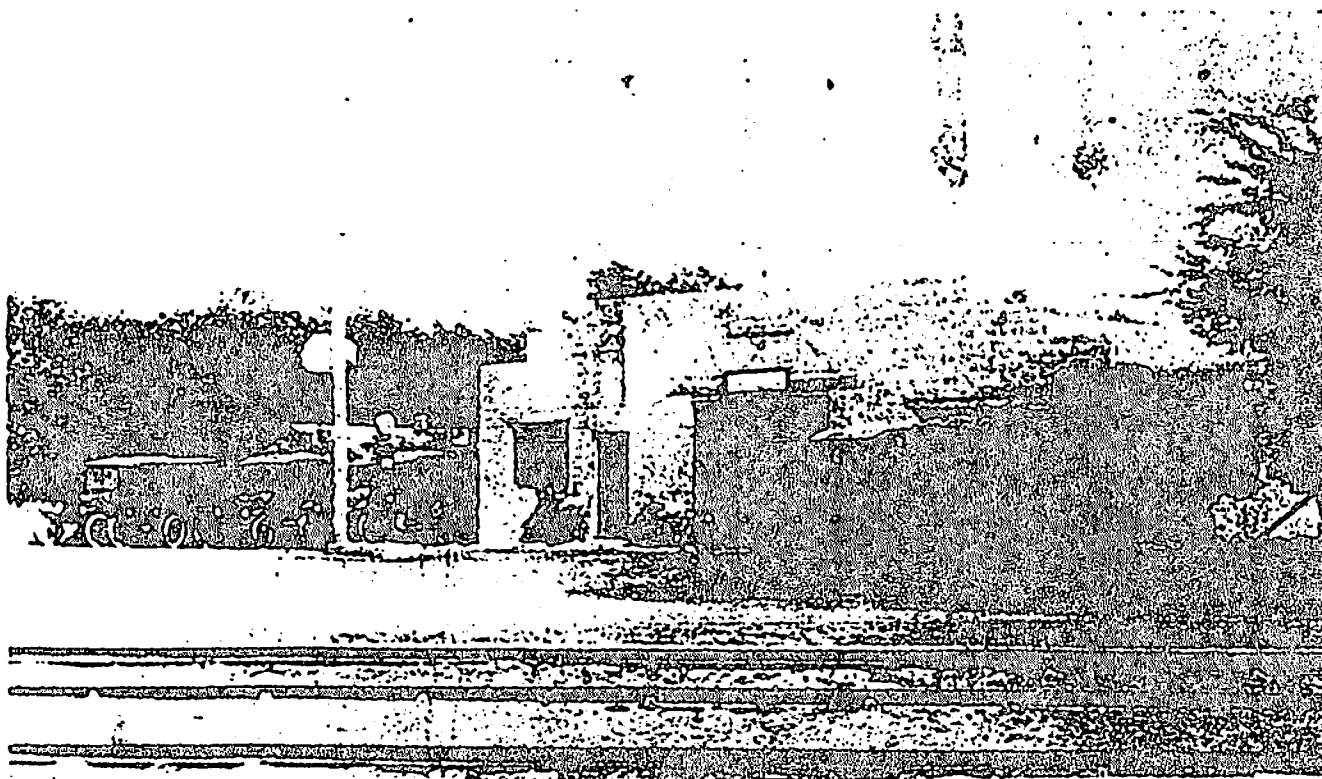
I have many other recollections of the Old Colony as I was growing up in Duxbury. Among them the time an overloaded freight train's locomotives jumped the rails beside the John Alden House and lay on their sides while curious crowds of Duxbury people came to see them.

Here chafing at the starting line so to speak were the Wolverine that would join the New York section at Albany and roar on to Detroit, the Yankee Clipper that would be on its way to St. John, New Brunswick, by way of Portland and Bangor, ME. Here was the senator, readying itself for its direct run to Washington DC, and the first section of Broadway Limited that would also be joined by the New York section at Albany enroute to Chicago. And then of course there were locals for the South Shore and the suburbs, Duxbury's Old Colony leaving usually on track 23 and touching at Hingham, Cohasset, Scituate and Greenbush on the way.

The necessity for a means of transportation was recognized by the Pilgrims in the second allotment of land that occurred in 1627 when each land area carried with it the condition that water access be re-

Among them was Alice Wadsworth DeWolfe with her two 10-year old twin boys. I remember her remark: "I wanted my 2 boys to see how such a powerful thing as a steam locomotive could be rendered totally helpless." Another continuing remembrance was the problem the 2:30 train presented as I drove over the wooden bridge spanning the cut through the hill after passing the trestle over the Mill Pond Creek. We had 2 meat customers beyond this bridge and it was a trick to get the horse across the bridge before the train came. The horse took a dim view of walking over a fire-breathing monster like this. Children used to stand on this bridge it is alleged and drop pebbles down the locomotive smokestack as it went under their feet.

It was this 2:30 train, too, that used to ignite grass fires along the railroad right of way costing much



Train tracks in front of present *Clipper* office on South Station St.

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money for the fire department. Tom Herrick told me a few nights ago how well he remembered as I do the teams of teenage boys my father enlisted each spring to burn the right of way and save this money. I took some time the other day to satisfy my curiosity about the Old Colony roadbed, what happened to the huge oak beams and granite blocks that formed the Island Creek trestle and what became of the bridge over the cut my horse hated so much? It so happened that a Duxbury woman now completing her course of studies at Hood College in Frederick, MD, Anne Sinclair was putting together a paper on the subject, and this provided me with just the pretext I needed to satisfy my curiosity.

We began our inspection trip with the spot behind the Millbrook shopping area where the tracks used to lie over the marshes from Green Harbor. (Was this the place where passengers were required to disembark and walk around because the ground was too soft to take the full load?) I had noted on an earlier trip the tough oak beams that supported the roadbed over Back River. We then returned and I pointed out the old freight shed that still stands beside the right of way on the property of the B.F. Goodrich Lumber and Oil Co. It is rumored that if present plans go through this will become a restaurant one day. We followed Railroad Ave. to Alden St., where a residence now stands across the roadbed. I pointed out the roadbed on Surplus St. where a slight rise in the roadway still marks its earlier use for tracks. No discernible trace could be seen of the double tracks and the locomotive turnaround that filled the space for some distance on the land opposite the *Duxbury Clipper* office. I recalled watching a conductor on each side of this circular device swing a 300-ton locomotive completely around so that it was headed back to Boston after a run to this point.

We then drove to the locale of the old Island Creek trestle and my diligence was rewarded for here were a few concrete blocks still standing. I looked over at the cut through the hill opposite and saw that it had been partially filled. I drove up the hill above the Mill Pond where Duxbury's last ice house stood till it was burned down and we climbed out of the car to see just how the old wood bridge had withstood the tests of time and weather. It appeared that the cut had been filled just as it was and left that way. We then drove around to check the spot where the Island Creek station had stood opposite the large storage building that still remains. My grandmother Duff lived across the tracks from this building so the entire area was familiar to me. And I recalled the day when I stood beside these tracks and watched 2 steam locomotives push a gigantic snowplow lifting snowdrifts and top ice crusts several feet into the air, thus reopening the town to rail service after an isolation of 7 days.

My question as I resurveyed the Old Colony roadbed with Anne Sinclair was the one the Lord asked Ezekiel in Chapter 37 of the Bible record, "Can these bones live again?" I knew the Old Colony had served Duxbury for 68 years providing much of the economic prosperity of the town. In fact by investigating its origins and the mergers it experienced it could be said that it goes as far back to the Quincy Granite road in 1825.

It was indeed hard to see just how the old roadbed could be reactivated. Thanks to David Mittell and a few other prodders, things look bright for the reestablishment of the railroad as far south as Scituate. Money has been appropriated but obstacles remain, chiefly in the preoccupation with the projected third harbor tunnel and the new lowered arterial throughway. But experimental commuter service has begun to Needham and Dedham with good results. The urgency is here to make possible a commuter trip to Boston in at least half the time it takes by private automobile. Nothing less than this will work as David says in his last article on the subject.

But something must be done and soon especially to curtail the slaughter on our highways in which we kill as many people each year as we lost in the entire Vietnam war. The aggregate cost of transporting people by expensive highways and even more expensive automobiles is so much greater than rail transportation that by necessity some kind of return to it is an intelligent response to our transportation needs today. Our railroad systems of a half century ago were the key to the expansion of our country. I noted in the news last week that China just had a big celebration over the opening of a great transportation center in Beijing (formerly Peking) based chiefly on railroading. Chinese leaders have apparently decided that this was the first step in implementing the communication of the varied areas of the country. Or was it a lesson of the glut and carnage of American highways put to good use?

At any rate it was a useful trip Ann and I took to look over what remains of a sec of that great movement of America that subdued a continent and laid the foundation for our way of life today. Perhaps another monument is needed to remind us of these great days in which Duxbury shared. It can indeed remind us that we must again take hold of our transportation problems with both hands if we are to come close to duplicating the system we once had less than a century ago. The new multi-transport facility now under way at South Station may be a beginning but I doubt that its image of power under control will approach that of the winter day I first saw it so long ago.